

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PHNOM 04291 100517Z

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /026 W

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P 100405Z MAR 75

FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9690

C O N F I D E N T I A L PHNOM PENH 4291

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, MORG, CB

SUBJ: PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP

REF: PHNOM PENH 4277

1. YESTERDAY, MARCH 9, I BROUGHT TOGETHER PRIME MINISTER LONG BORET WITH GENERAL PALMER IN ORDER TO DISCUSS GKR PLANS TO "RESTRUCTURE" THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FANK AND THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT. THERE IS REALLY NO NEED TO REITERATE THE ARGUMENTS OF LONG BORET WHICH I HAVE REPORTED IN PREVIOUS MESSAGES. I CAN BE SUMMARIZED BY SAYING THAT THE MARSHAL AND THE GKR BELIEVE THAT AN EARLY CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP IS THE ONLY WAY TO REVERSE THE PRESENT TREND IN PHNOM PENH AND BOOST THE DETERIORATING MORALE AMONG KHMER MILITARY AND CIVILIANS. WHILE THE EFFECT OF SUCH A CHANGE ON THE DEBATE IN THE US WILL BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT, LONG BORET AND LON NOL BELIEVE THAT THEY MUST ACT RAPIDLY TO CHANGE THE PREVAILING MOOD OF PESSIMISM WHICH IS UNDERMINING THE KHMER WAR EFFORT.

2. GENERAL PALMER POINTED OUT THE RISKS INVOLVED IN A PRECIPITANT CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP. HE SPECIFICALLY ASKED WHO WOULD REPLACE SOSTHENE AND TO WHAT EXTENT WOULD OTHER GENERAL OFFICERS FOLLOW SOSTHENE AND SUBMIT THEIR RESIGNATIONS. GENERAL PALMER POINTED OUT THAT SOSTHENE HAD WORKED WELL, THAT THE MILITARY SETBACKS WERE NOT ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE GENERAL STAFF BUT ARE LARGELY THE RE-

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SULT OF POOR EXECUTION OF THE PLANS AND PRIMARILY DUE TO

LACK OF TOTAL CIVILIAN SUPPORT FOR THE MILITARY EFFORT (I.E. INADEQUATE RECRUITING). THEREFORE, HE DOUBTED THAT A CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP WOULD HAVE A POSITIVE LONG-RANGE EFFECT ON THE WAR EFFORT.

3. COMMENT: AS I REPORTED IN REFTTEL, THE KHMER CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP HAS MADE UP ITS MIND AND WILL NOT BE DETERRED AT THIS SAGE BY ANYTHING WE SAY EXCEPT A CLEAR VETO, SOMETHING I FEEL I HAVE NO INSTRUCTIONS FROM WASHINGTON TO DO. WHILE I AGREE WITH GENERAL PALMER'S TECHNICAL REASONING THAT SOSTHENE WAS A COMPETENT COMMANDER OF FANK, AND THE REASONS FOR FANK'S SETBACK ARE DEEPER THAN ITS TOP LEADERSHIP, I ALSO SYMPATHIZE WITH THE MARSHAL'S AND LONG BORET'S REASONING THAT SOME DRASTIC ACTION IS NEEDED TO TURN AROUND THE SITUATION IN PHNOM PENH. A CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP, IF NOT ACCOMPANIED BY A SQUABBLE AMONG FANK GENERALS, MAY THEREFORE HAVE A BRIEF FAVORABLE IMPACT AND PRECIOUS TIME MIGHT BE GAINED. I THEREFORE AM NOT INCLINED TO STOP THE LON NOL STEAMROLLER BUT RATHER EMPHASIZE THAT THE CHANGE BE MADE WITH MINIMUM ADVERSE FALL OUT AND THAT WE ARE CONSULTED BEFORE REPLACEMENTS ARE NAMED SO THAT WE CAN GIVE OUR VIEWS ON THE TECHNICAL COMPETENCE OF THE CANDIDATES.

4. ON THE SUBJECT OF NEW FACES, I ASKED LONG BORET OUT-RIGHT WHETHER LON NON WOULD RECEIVE A PORTFOLIO IN THE NEW CABINET. HE ASSURED ME THAT THIS WOULD NOT BE THE CASE.
DEAN

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PERSONNEL RESIGNATIONS, MILITARY GOVERNMENT, ORGANIZATION & MANAGEMENT
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 10 MAR 1975
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975PHNOM04291
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750082-1103
From: PHNOM PENH
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750366/aaaachnm.tel
Line Count: 90
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 75 PHNOM PENH 4277
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 08 JUL 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <08 JUL 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <09 JUL 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, MORG, CB, FANK
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006